

Emotional Abuse Cannot Be Called Therapy

As the President of a Christian Seminary serving students entering various forms of ministry, I am compelled to speak out in support of outlawing the unchristian barbaric practice known as conversion “therapy”; a practice that has as its goal, converting all to a heterosexual orientation and cisgender identity. As the Clinical Director of a mental health crisis intervention service and a mental health clinician I see the deep emotional trauma caused by such practices as it gets expressed through suicidal thoughts and behaviors, depression and chemical dependency.

Christian teachings repeatedly center on our all being made in God’s image and one in Christ. Galatians 3:28 speaks to the unimportance of lesser differences in people through the experience of Baptism. People of all sexual orientations, gender identities and differences are made in the image of God. Science has shown that many orientations and identities are normal. Therefore, working to change some of God’s children, particularly through abusive practices, denies the sacredness of God’s creation and love.

Advocates of this practice argue that it is their religious freedom to perform conversion therapy. But as a society we have repeatedly said that there are limits to that freedom when it causes physical or emotional harm. In Minnesota genital mutilation based upon religious belief is against the law and allowing your child to suffer or die without medical care is not accepted even in compliance with a religious belief.

There is little disagreement between mental health professionals or educators that emotional abuse is a dangerous and scarring experience, often with long-term devastating consequences. Counselors who treat victims of abuse identify emotional scars that have measurable negative impact on physical and mental health, even measurably shortening victims’ length of life. And these impacts last for decades after the abuse ends.

Members of the GLBTQ community have been victims of chronic emotional and physical abuse in a multitude of forms; at family, community and societal levels. Many do not disclose their identities to loved ones for years, for fear of rejection and hatred from those who are vital in their lives. When they muster the courage to talk honestly about themselves, they too often experience the very rejection that they anticipated. They are victims of violence and discrimination at extraordinary rates. And until recently they were prevented from the most basic right of legal marriage.

But perhaps one of the cruelest forms of emotional abuse of members of the GLBTQ community is the practice of “conversion therapy;” or coercively working to intimidate people into denying that they are who they are. Despite the use of the word therapy the practice is not therapeutic and is in fact emotionally traumatizing. It has been repeatedly proven not to have any impact other than creating deep and long-lasting emotional pain in its victims.

One of the most universally traumatic experiences in life is to be hated for who you are. Whether for the color of your skin, shape of your body, sexual orientation or gender identity; being told that who you are is unacceptable creates isolation, alienation and depression. The trauma is particularly devastating when it is framed as the hatred and rejection of your creator and savior. The one thing conversion “therapy” does not do is change anyone, even if it scares them into denying their own identity.

Conversion "therapy" is about power and control in the same ways that domestic violence and sexual assault are about using intimidation and fear to take away another person's humanity and agency. The American Psychiatric and American Psychological Associations made very clear some 45 years ago that a multitude of sexual orientations are all normal. So, a desired change of orientation or identity by those with emotional or physical power in a person's life is not about seeking normative behavior; it is purely about using power to abuse another person.

Our State has understood the need to protect vulnerable people from abuse and neglect. When parents turn their children and adolescents over to abusers it is our obligation to intervene and our laws must align with that commitment to keeping them safe.

As a civil society with roots in faith traditions that teach love and caring for others, we have a responsibility to support laws that protect others from abuse and mistreatment. In that spirit we have a moral obligation to support legislation that outlaws the use of conversion therapy. For these reasons I am in full support of the proposed ordinances passed in Minneapolis and Duluth to protect LGBTQ youth from the harms of conversion "therapy" and I urge the state legislature to pass the Mental Health Protections Act in the upcoming session.

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